

Revolution? What revolution? What can one find out from TV news

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«When the country has just embarked on stable work [and] we can see the change, [those] people are trying to interfere. All those, the so-called opposition which are the servants of the people – I will put it straight – [they] will bring us, the people, to the worse» (from an interview with a man working at a plant for the «Problemy Zaporizhstali» TV program, UT-1, UTN, September 11, 2002, 21:00. Quoted after the transcript provided by the Efir-Digest, produced by the Efir-Ukraine Information and Publishing Firm)

Effect of «Accumulation of Information» and the Media

Analyzing media influence on processes of shaping public opinion, one cannot but see contradictions within the information environment that may be produced by the media themselves. When the media present different opinions, the above processes become less dependent on them media. According to one of the specialists on the media theory G. Gadzheyev, «the media that are part of the contemporary reality with all of its contradictions and conflicts, to a certain extent, renew it. Due to that fact currents of information consist of a large number of messages that contradict each other, [or] often are mutually exclusive». Therefore, «no molding of public opinion occurs». On the other hand, when some of the variety of the media begin to act in the same direction, re-broadcasting the same interpretations of some events, their role in forming public opinion grows dramatically due to the emergence of specific cumulative effect. But in that case the media start acting like an «agitator and propagandist» – and that has a negative impact on those who consume the media products. The freedom for consumers of media products shrink dramatically – with all possible negative consequences of that fact. Information stops being information and becomes a manipulation tool. At the same time, the media stop performing their function of delivering information.

In this context, the current situation in the Ukrainian media environment, primarily television, is worth special comments – particularly as long as it has something to do with media coverage of the opposition protest actions planned for September 16. The media coverage of the would-be September 16 actions has been predominantly negative. The coverage is dominated with pro-Kuchma assessment of the forthcoming events. Given that no clear criteria of «opposition» exist in Ukraine, and that the official establishment treats the opposition not as political opponents but as personal enemies, the pro-power media (i.e., almost ALL electronic media) condemns those who position themselves as the opposition – which itself does not contribute to a balanced dialogue and the search for societal consensus. As genesis of the opposition deserves a special study, we will not address it here in detail but will try to summarize some trends of TV news coverage of the past week. IN a sense, those trends are rather demonstrative for the whole situation in

the Ukrainian media environment.

September 16 as shown by the TV

Even those of ordinary Ukrainians who did not hear anything about the protest actions planned by the opposition for September 16 could start thinking hard after seeing the news as broadcast by TV. A week before there was nothing in the news except smog over Ukrainian cities and the Bush administration's plans to attack Iraq. From time to time the TV offered contradictory pieces of information that a parliamentary had (or had not) been formed. The same politicians were seen as commenting on most of the processes in the parliament. However, at some point the TV started to give massive information about mass protest actions, claiming that «some forces» are dragging Ukraine into «the abyss of chaos and violence» (UT-1, UTN, September 11, 2002). The pieces of information bore practically no difference throughout the channels; they announced that the country was facing «crawling revolt [against] the state» that was organized by «political failures». Moreover, judging from the TV news, participants of the announced actions will be doing so because they are hoping to get paid for that. According to governor of the Donetsk oblast Viktor Yanukovych, «the press today writes openly that participation in the [protest] actions costs 100 hryvnias» (UT-1, UTN, September 10, 2002).

TV news reproduce mass loath of the opposition done not only by the Kyiv-based politicians (where, in fact, they are a minority), but by senior regional leaders, representatives of «working collectives», committees of mothers of large families, rectors of Ukrainian universities and alike. Judging from the contents and tone of the TV pieces, those of Ukrainians who had felt nostalgic about the former USSR could partly regain the basis for their memories. For instance, for a few days in a row the media broadcast statements of regional officials, made at a national assembly of representatives of state bodies of power, local self-governance bodies and «the public», initiated by the Presidential Administration. The «news» about the assembly was followed with broad coverage of a series of regional meetings. At the meetings, leaders of regions and members of regional elected councils would state anxiety that «initiators of the protest actions may rock the political situation and ruin the civic peace, and that would lead to the break-up of the Ukrainian society». The geography of those noteworthy pieces of «news» was rather broad: the TV channels informed about such events in Kharkiv, Donetsk, Mykolayiv, Luhansk, Odessa and Kherson. The presidium of the Dnipropetrovsk Regional Council also issued a statement arguing that the people of Dnipropetrovsk are extremely anxious about some political radicals' efforts to get to power by all means. To complete the picture, a seminar for the regional media was organized on September 12. At the seminar, first deputy head of the presidential administration Valery Khoroshkovsky argued that the «power establishment» was prepared to discuss with opposition its views on development of this state. The TV news, however, offered no coverage of reaction of those who had been called to dialogue.

The theme of «craving for power» by the opposition is not the only issue is being multiplied and disseminated by the controlled TV. Seeking to reach minds of the broadest circles of people, the manipulators claim that the opposition drives the country into the

risk of damaging relations with Russia. For instance, the address of members of the Mykolayiv oblast council (as shown by TET, «Visti», on September 12, 2002) stated: «the calls of Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, Moroz and Symonenko are aimed against the current political system of Ukraine. The position of those persons, first of all, is designed to instigate to violence and mass upheavals. A serious threat is Mr. Yushchenko's attempt to undermine the Ukrainian-Russian economic relations, to put an end to cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union in order to re-orient Ukraine completely towards NATO». Noteworthy, the piece contained no mention whatsoever as to what sort of «threats» to «cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union» had been caused by Nasha Ukraina and other political forces, particularly in the context of the September 16 events. It is also unclear from the coverage to what extent the Mykolayiv oblast council sees Ukraine involves in the EEU.

This was not a mere coincidence. On September 12, for instance, the «Podrobnosti» news program of the INTER channels quoted the session of the Luhansk regional council that discussed the planned actions of the opposition and argued that «if it comes to break-up with Russia, there definitely will be other forces, capable to raise a different issue – of joining Ukraine to the union of Russia and Belarus and solving that issue through a referendum.» Noteworthy, the other view was never present in such pieces. It was also never clear what the basis for the claims of «break-up with Russia», reportedly made by the opposition, could be.

Meanwhile, those who watched the news broadcast by the Ukrainian channels within the past week could see how similar (sometimes identical) were the pictures and phrases that appeared from the screen in the news programs of different (once competing) TV channels. On September 10, for instance, the STB channel showed the session of a «national conference on local self-governance» and quoted the governor of the Luhansk region as saying the following: «there used to be revolutions before, and we know that except ruins, tears, they had brought nothing good. It is not in the street that we should be seeking ways for our further development, but at the negotiation table». On September 12, the governor was shown by the TSN news of «Studio 1+1» as saying the same things.

The media coverage became more and more intense (and the tone more and more grim) as the end of the week approached. Noteworthy, a specific role in making the general feeling of anxiety was played by the Ministry of the Interior. The news programs devoted a major share of air time to description of the police's preparations for «countering the public unrest» and «violations of public order». As if preventing questions about the too eager position of the law-enforcement bodies, head of the Administrative Service Department of the Ministry of the Interior Oleksandr Savchenko told a national news program that «the Army is also not in the time of war now, but it is always prepared to enter the war». «We are always prepared to stop any massive unrest if it grows to a large scale,» he said (ICTV, «Fakty», September 12, 2002).

Such statements, made by senior police officers, are sure to make the people anxious; for the police authorities do not hide that they are preparing «to counter the massive unrest». Logically, they may be inclined to treat any protest as «massive unrest» at least to justify

their involvement to which they have now committed themselves.

On the other hand, even those of Ukrainian who heard nothing about the planned protests are now likely to treat them seriously. If no other information is available, an ordinary Ukrainian may conclude from the news that (1) the country is facing revolution, (2) in addition to the «red» opposition, there is some other kind of opposition, and (3) probably for the first time in Ukraine's history the opposition is united and consolidated.

Noteworthy, the news programs present Yushchenko, Tymoshenko, Moroz and Symonenko as one team, linking them by the negative coverage and selecting the facts in a way as to show that their «togetherness». Another noteworthy detail is that according to the news coverage, the opposition is very strong and is a very serious threat to the regime. The regime, in its turn, treats the opposition as its direct and worst enemy. It is also visible that the regime is preparing to protect itself from the opposition with the use of radical actions of law-enforcement bodies, claiming it would protect «public peace». In the news programs, representatives of state authorities and elected bodies of power campaign openly against the opposition and its actions. However, this unity of the regime may be counterproductive. Similar «information management» during the election campaign resulted in massive «protest votes», though the opposition was practically denied access to the media. The 2002 election results demonstrated low level of trust to the media by voters.

Instead of conclusions

The causes of the current PR actions in which the Ukrainian TV got involved should be sought in general patterns of relations between the Ukrainian power establishment and the media. Without being a formal founder or owner of media outlets, the state manages to exert pressure on practically all the media. The specific attention of the state machine to the media has been caused by the ability to use them to influence directly the process of shaping public opinion and controlling the flow of information available to the public. While private media are mostly controlled by individuals and groups who, in their turn, are also controlled by the state bodies, most of the Ukrainian media don't even dream about protesting against the repression. In a country that lacks free market, with the hypertrophic role of the state in everything there is no room for the free media. Even though censorship is banned by the Constitution, it is overwhelming. Ukrainian journalism suffers from the same problems that the Ukrainian society and Ukrainian economy as a whole.

The coverage of the prospective September 16 events is similar to the coverage of the opposition during the recent election race. The techniques of manipulating information, brought into use after the recent parliamentary elections, include the methods of «sorting» information, ignoring facts and events, «dozing» information, domination of comments and judgments over facts, presentation of facts and events out of their context, the lack of balanced presentation of different views, and obvious disparity in coverage of major political forces. The above «methods» were widely used by the controlled electronic media during the recent election campaign. Nowadays, however, the contents and formats have become even more radical and unequivocal, than before the March

2002 elections. Then there was a certain «pluralism» of political forces that could manipulate the media which still had to present more than one perspective. While during the election campaign the media played a role of a major political advertising vehicle, now the situation is even more complex. Information is presented almost exclusively negatively, with the same «cloned» statements and pictures appearing on the screen in programs of different TV stations. While there is nothing new in the fact that the Ukrainian media find it difficult to perform their primary function of providing information in an unbiased, pluralist manner, the degree to which the pressure on the media has been brought is something to be really concerned about.